

Division of Soil and Water Conservation
Division Director's Report

June 24, 2015

Presented by Darryl M. Glover;

Director, Division of Soil and Water Conservation

Mr. President, members of the Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation District Board, please accept this Soil and Water Conservation Division Report from the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR).

Resource Management Plan (RMP) Program

As you know, the RMP and Conservation Planning computer modules were completed in February. To date, over 200 contracted RMPs in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed have been entered into the module. They are in various stages of development or review. Contractors are well on the way to completing all of the calendar year 2015 contractual RMPs. We shall release a new Request for Proposals by August 1, which will offer \$120,000 in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, and \$100,000 in the rest of the state, to develop RMPs under contracts in calendar 2016.

The 2015 Virginia General Assembly passed HB1618, introduced by Delegate Edward T. Scott, and SB1126, introduced by Senator Emmett W. Hanger, Jr., that effective July 1, 2015, creates an open meeting exemption for the discussion of personal and proprietary information related to RMPs. The Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board issued related guidance for SWCDs on May 20, 2015, which was sent to every SWCD.

DCR has initiated monthly conference calls for SWCD RMP Technical Review Committee (TRC) members. These calls will be held on the fourth Monday of each month, from 10am – 11am. We recently released an "RMP Program Update", which contains timely RMP information for SWCDs, a flier entitled "9 Things Producers Should Know," which includes an updated list of RMP Certified Plan Developers, promotional RMP rack cards that can be customized for individual SWCDs, and have also updated the RMP Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document. Each of these documents can be found on the DCR RMP webpage at http://www.dcr.virginia.gov/soil_and_water/rmp.shtml.

BMP Verification

The Department has continued working with the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) on the plan for BMP verification, as required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in order to continue to receive pollution reduction credit in the new Chesapeake Bay model. DEQ is reportedly on schedule to submit that draft plan by June 30. Once submitted, EPA will review the proposals for each sector and make comments. A final report is due in October. DEQ has agreed to update this board at its meeting in September.

The first step towards agricultural BMP verification in Virginia, with nutrient management plans, will begin on July 1, 2015. All nutrient management plans written by DCR employees or DCR contractors, that are up for either renewal or revision in FY2016, will be verified and reported either as acres consistent with and not consistent with nutrient management plans. This will establish a statewide baseline of consistency. Quality assurance (Q/A) will be provided by other DCR staff who will ride along with these planners on a statistically significant (per EPA requirements) percentage of these surveys.

The tillage surveys, part of the Voluntary BMP Grant Project, and already underway in many SWCDs, will also be a component of BMP verification, and will need to be repeated every several years. SWCDs have through April 2016 to complete the tillage surveys. DCR will provide Q/A by repeating a select handful of the surveys.

Voluntary BMP Grant Project

Other components of the Voluntary BMP Grant Project are also making progress. Grant Agreements were sent to all affected SWCDs in the Chesapeake Bay watershed at the end of May. These voluntary agreements offered payment for inspections of roughly 1,700 specific structural agricultural BMPs that have fallen out of lifespan between FY2010 – FY2015. Once verified, these BMPs will receive extended lifespans by EPA and therefore will continue to provide pollution reduction credit towards Virginia's Chesapeake Bay WIP goals.

The aforementioned voluntary grant agreements also offered modest payments to specified SWCDs in Area III and Peanut SWCD, to report cover crops in FY2016 that will receive neither cost-share nor tax credits. Due to grant funding

limitations, SWCDs can only be paid for reporting the first 86,000 voluntary small grain (SL-8, SL-8B, and SL-8H) cover crop acres through April, 2016.

In order to better facilitate reporting of voluntary BMPs in the Ag BMP Tracking Program, enhancements to the program have been contracted for and will be completed by July 1.

DCR will provide a webinar in July to inform SWCDs about how to report voluntary BMP data and obtain payment for BMP inspections and reporting voluntary cover crops.

Livestock Stream Exclusion (SL-6) Initiative

We are quickly approaching the end date for farmers to sign up for 100% state cost-share for the SL-6 livestock stream exclusion BMP. Per normal fiscal year close out procedures, SWCDs have until July 14 to enter applications into the Ag BMP Tracking Program. Although over \$45 million has either been expended or obligated for SL-6 since the 100% cost-share began with VEI in late 2012, and the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation Board voted to set aside enough funding to retire all remaining SL-6 cost-share applications through FY2014, a surge in the current fiscal year has resulted in a projected backlog of approximately \$37 million for roughly 751 projects that are still pending. The Administration and the General Assembly will need to consider whether to request a special appropriation to retire this FY2015 SL-6 backlog.

State cost-share payments on new SL-6 applications submitted after June 30, 2015, will be reduced to 80% reimbursement with a \$70,000 cap. However, in order to continue to make a 100% reimbursement option available, the Department shall begin doubling the amount of state match for new Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) practices in Virginia. An amendment to the CREP Agreement with Virginia is currently under review by the US Department of Agriculture, Farm Services Agency. It will formalize Virginia's agreement to increase CREP match, but formal approval of the amendment will not delay the implementation date of July 1.

Engineering Services Program

DCR continues to work very closely with the SWCD Engineering Workgroup. This workgroup is assisting DCR with shaping the near-term vs. longer-term priorities for our Engineering Services program. Several sub-committees have been

formed: Certification – which will aid in the development of a state engineering job approval authority (EJAA) program for SWCD staff under the DCR Agricultural BMP Engineer’s license; Training – which will identify the engineering training needs of SWCDs as well as a suggested training structure for state EJAA and also identify outside training opportunities; Design Tools – which will identify design tools and resources that would be of assistance to SWCD staff in performing job functions related to the Agricultural BMP Program; Standard Operating Procedures which will identify areas where engineering related standard procedures are needed to improve statewide consistency by SWCDs; and, Website – which will aid in the development of a website that will serve as a technical resource for SWCDs.

We have also provided a procedure for SWCDs to use to request engineering assistance from DCR, and circulated a survey to Engineering Workgroup members to help to refine program priorities given challenges we are experiencing raising the level of staffing in this program.

As you may remember, in 2014 DCR applied for grant funding to hire additional agricultural BMP engineering support via the US Department of Agriculture, Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). Although DCR was successful with a different RCPP grant proposal, the engineering related application was not successful. We were prepared to reapply to RCPP this year, pre-proposals are due July 8, 2015, but recently learned that our intended use of these grant funds might not qualify because we desire to use the funding for engineering support on state agricultural cost-share projects. DCR will make a decision to submit or forego applying for another RCPP grant, based on further guidance from the national office of the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

Despite these challenges, DCR will soon advertise for a second position in our Engineering Services Program. This position will be stationed in our Staunton Regional Office.

Nutrient Management

In addition to nutrient management plan verification, DCR is beginning to advance our Small Farms Program. Through a cooperative agreement with Virginia Tech, our objective is to better serve the small farm community by assisting them with nutrient management planning through dedicated staff. Two contractual employees, through Virginia Tech, staff this program, Tammy Holler

and Valerie Moore. We shall soon release a new Small Farms flier. This program will be a DCR focus at the upcoming Ag Expo in August.

We also continue to make progress with nutrient management planning on golf courses. As of June, there are 108 golf courses with plans, covering 11, 700 acres. Our goal is for 327 golf courses to have plans by 2017.

Other New Staff in Division Programs

Ken Carter, NRCS retired, has been hired to develop our state Conservation Planning and Certification curriculum. Ken will be with the Division through December 2015, as a part-time employee. He will develop course materials, a record keeping system for tracking state-issued conservation plan certifications, format certificates we shall utilize, propose a system of continuing education credits, draft guidance for SWCDs, and conduct initial orientations for SWCDs at Graves Mountain in August, and at the annual VASWCD meeting in December.

We have advertised for a Shoreline Engineer to staff the Shoreline Erosion Advisory Service, which as you know, has been placed back in the Department. The advertisement for this position closed on June 22. We expect to conduct interviews in July. This position will be placed in the Tappahannock Office, where we have also re-filled the Area Secretary position.

Very recently, we welcomed Chantel Wilson, a contractual employee through Virginia Tech, to our Urban Nutrient Management Program, and Nicolas Moody, into our Nutrient Management Program as a Bio-Solids Specialist. Finally, we shall soon advertise for a District Services Manager, who will be responsible for the Ag Needs Assessment Report, manage most EPA required reporting and related data that the Division must provide, coordinate division staff participation in Chesapeake Bay Program committees, and supervise some of the other division programs.

Area Visits

Since the Spring Area meetings were held this year, I have held follow up meetings in Areas I, II, and IV. These meetings afforded the opportunity to discuss Department initiatives in much more detail with District Directors. Similar meetings will be held in the remaining areas when their schedules allow.

VASWCD Grant Agreement

Last, but not least, the VASWCD annual grant agreement will be forwarded to the Association any day.